BERA

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BERA NETWORKS

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About *Research Intelligence*
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Rising to the challenges of our times

DOMINIC WYSE
UCL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

One of the many profound consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic is that it is altering society's perspectives on the importance of different jobs. The support for NHS staff – most memorably demonstrated by the nation applauding together outside their homes – comes from a deep sense of gratitude for their work saving lives and putting themselves at risk.

Teachers and other people who work with children and young people are another example of a vital service: for some of the most vulnerable children and young people, schools and other institutions remain open at the time of writing. The importance of this work causes us all to reflect upon the work we do, and this is no less true for education researchers. There are many examples of education research having a positive impact on the most disadvantaged members of society, and there is a palpable need for us all to learn lessons from the pandemic – not least how we can help the most vulnerable learners maintain their progress alongside their more affluent peers. We are all struggling to adjust to the context we find ourselves in, and to figure out how our work can be put to best use to support the global effort to mitigate the effects of the virus.

I was struck by the view shared by geographer Jared Diamond on *Newsnight* (BBC2, 14 April), that this was the first time in history that the whole world shared a visible enemy that had created the need for a genuine global response from all people in all countries. The threat to humanity of climate change – which is not visible in the same way as the daily deaths caused by Covid-19 – is even more dangerous. Diamond was cautiously optimistic that some good could emerge from the current context: the global response to the virus may help us with less visible problems in future. In this context I'm glad to report that BERA will be inviting proposals for a new research commission looking at climate change and the role of education.

In another new initiative, BERA is in the process of establishing a College of Reviewers. This is a new opportunity for some of our most eminent colleagues to help BERA continue to ensure that the research that it sponsors is of the highest quality. The College's work will include reviewing tenders for research projects, nominations for prizes and applications for bursaries and scholarships.

BERA has also appointed a team to undertake the first part of its long-term State of Education initiative. Dr Chris Boyle, Dr Lauren Stentiford and Dr George Koutsouris of the University of Exeter and Professor Divya Jindal-Snape of the University of Dundee will conduct a rigorous review of published research to inform this project, the ultimate goal of which is to provide evidence-based resources for advocacy and critical reflection in relation to the state of education research.

Continuing a strand of work that BERA has been pursuing since its inception, a new paper in the *British Educational Research Journal* (Wyse, Brown, Oliver & Poblete, 2020) reports on the empirical study conducted as part of the Association's Close-to-practice project, which sought to define and further articulate the concept of close-to-practice (CtP) research. Among its findings are that high-quality CtP research has the potential to rigorously link theory with practice in new ways. However, the research also noted tensions for CtP research in relation to the Research Excellence Framework, and hence recommends more support for those doing CtP research from organisations such as BERA as well as from universities.

Finally, it was with sadness that we learned, in April, of the death of Professor Harvey Goldstein. He made innumerable contributions to education research, and both his knowledge of groundbreaking approaches to statistics and his understanding of the practical implications of claims based on statistics were extraordinary. To the very end he was working with BERA on the important work, led by Professor Gemma Moss, on baseline assessment.

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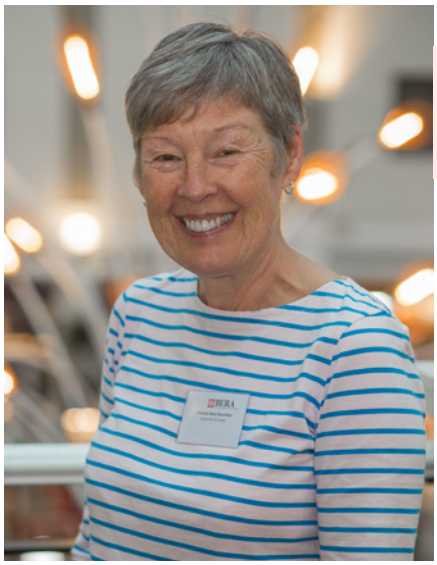
BERA NEWS



VIVIENNE BAUMFIELD TO BECOME BERA'S NEXT PRESIDENT

Vivienne Baumfield, professor of professional learning and director of research at the Graduate School of Education, University of Exeter, has been elected to the presidency of BERA following the open call put out in late 2019. She will begin her term as vice president this autumn, and will succeed current president Dominic Wyse to serve as our 37th president between 2021 and 2023.

Already a valued member of BERA Council, Vivienne is currently the chair of BERA's Publications Committee, and will remain in that role until September when she will be succeeded by Ros McLellan (see below).

ROS MCCLELLAN TO BECOME CHAIR OF PUBLICATIONS COMMITTEE

Ros McLellan, a senior lecturer at Cambridge University, will in September become the chair of BERA's Publications Committee, which provides oversight and sets the strategic direction of the Association's publishing activities.

Ros co-ordinates the SUPER network, a partnership between the Faculty of Education at Cambridge University and local schools that jointly conducts research of mutual benefit to all partners. She has been a member of BERA Council and the Publications Committee since 2018, and is also co-convenor of the European Educational Research Association's Network 8: Health Education.

New elections to BERA Council

Alison Fox, Sarah Seleznyov and Tanya Ovenden-Hope have won election to BERA Council.

Left to right: Alison Fox, Sarah Seleznyov & Tanya Ovenden-Hope

Alison Fox is senior lecturer in teaching and learning at the Open University, and is a convenor of BERA's Research Methodology in Education special interest group and a member of the editorial team of the BERA Blog.

Sarah Seleznyov is director of the London South Teaching School Alliance, and has served as a deputy headteacher, school improvement consultant and designer and leader of research-informed programmes for school leaders and teacher enquiry projects at the London Centre for Leadership in Learning, UCL Institute of Education. She is a member of the British Curriculum Forum steering group.

Tanya Ovenden-Hope is professor of education and strategic lead for Marjon University Cornwall. Her research focus is on educational isolation (particularly coastal, rural, small schools) and the relationship between teacher development and educational improvement. Her previous roles include director of education at Cornwall College and head of school at Plymouth University.

BERA TO ESTABLISH A COLLEGE OF REVIEWERS

At its meeting in January, Council agreed to set up a new BERA College of Reviewers to provide high-quality peer reviews for a range of BERA activities. With the increasing number and popularity of awards, funding opportunities and fellowships, this is a means of introducing greater rigour into BERA's decision-making processes, as well as an opportunity for leading members of the community to offer help to their peers.

The College will begin its work in autumn 2020, and we will initially be looking to appoint 10–12 reviewers. It is anticipated that each member of the College will be expected to undertake four or five review exercises per year in return for a small honorarium; dates for these exercises will be published well in advance. A significant level of experience will be necessary to join the College, although Council is also keen to implement mentoring and pathways for less experienced researchers.

NEW PROJECT: THE STATE OF EDUCATION RESEARCH IN THE UK

BERA has begun a major project that aims to look at the structures and processes that influence research activities in the UK, building on our previous work around the state of the field by establishing a sustainable model for monitoring the state of education research in the UK. The model will include a focus on education researchers and how their work and professional identities are shaped. The first stage – a review of existing published evidence on the structures and processes, both formal and informal, that influence research activities in the UK – will be carried out by Chris Boyle, Lauren Stentiford and George Koutsouris of the University of Exeter and Divya Jindal-Snape of the University of Dundee. This will inform the design of a survey of education researchers' views of their work and identities in relation to education research in universities that will seek to further examine the structures and processes that influence opportunity for, and engagement in, research activity for staff working in university education departments.

RESEARCH COMMISSIONS

BERA's current research commission, Competing Discourses of Early Childhood Education and Care, completed its final seminar in early 2020 and will be publishing the outcomes of its work later this year.

The next call for proposals will be issued in early summer, and will focus on education and environmental sustainability. This subject follows a hot topic session at the 2019 Annual Conference, and is designed to offer opportunities for researchers to examine how all those involved in education – including pupils, educators and educational researchers – can respond to the climate crisis.

The overall aim of the research commissions is to identify and address issues of current importance to the study and practice of education that may have future consequences for the discipline and its research communities. They also reflect BERA's wider commitment to considering the role that educational research can play in responding to global challenges, and in particular to the Global Challenges Research Fund announced by UK Research and Innovation in 2015.

THE BERA BLOG

Spring 2020 special issues

- 'The challenges and solutions for qualitative researchers in gaining ethical approval and consent', edited by Carmel Capewell and Alison Fox.
- 'Education for our planet and our future', edited by Kevin Smith.
- 'Independent researchers: The challenges of accessing ethical approval', edited by Carrie Birch.
- 'Researching education and mental health: From "Where are we now?" to "What next?" edited by Michelle Jayman, Jonathan Glazzard and Anthea Rose.

See bera.ac.uk/blog

NEW PUBLICATIONS

Final reports of the 2018–2019 British Curriculum Forum Curriculum Investigation Grant:

- *Learning from variation*, by Ruth Trundley & Helen J. Williams
- *Local language, school and community: Curricular innovation towards closing the achievement gap*, by Claire Needler & Jamie Fairbairn
- *Exploring task design as an enabler of leading teaching in secondary schools*, by Lorna Shires & Matt Hunter.

BERA Bites, issue 5: *Research used or produced in schools: Which informs practitioners most?*, edited by Ian Potter.

A research approach to curriculum development: A British Curriculum Forum event report, edited by Sarah Seleznyov & Gerry Czerniawski.

Winners of the 2020 BERA Doctoral Thesis and Master's Awards

BERA MASTER'S DISSERTATION AWARD

Thu Thu's dissertation, 'Exploring Governance and Governmentality in Myanmar's Education Reforms', analyses policy texts and interviews with key informants to illustrate how education is used as a site of neoliberal governmentality, and specifically how education policy is used as discourses (and consequently practices) that structure fields of possible rationalities, thoughts and actions in line with the country's broader aims of economic development and national competitiveness. In combining the governance and governmentality perspectives, Thu's research points the way towards a more nuanced understanding of the various ways in which the steering and governing mechanisms of the state come to influence individual conduct, and vice versa.

BERA DOCTORAL THESIS AWARD

Nozomi Sakata's winning thesis, 'Learner-Centred Pedagogy and its Implications for Pupils' Schooling Experiences and Learning Outcomes: A Mixed-Methods Case Study in Tanzania', addressed the question of whether learner-centred pedagogy (LCP) can be applicable and effective in developing countries, where it has been found to be incompatible with some national sociocultural and political contexts. Focussing on primary school pupils' experiences, Nozomi explores whether Tanzania's *ujamaa* philosophy and historical context makes it unusually compatible with the principles of LCP, and the extent to which those principles are being appropriated there.

Now open: The BCF Curriculum Investigation Grant

The purpose of the British Curriculum Forum (BCF's) biennial Curriculum Investigation Grant is to support and acknowledge the importance of research led by schools and colleges with a focus on curriculum inquiry and investigation.

The grant for the academic year 2020/21 – which is now open to applications, until 19 June – is worth up to £5,000 for the winner, with £3,500 for two other grants. The amounts awarded will be dependent on the number and quality of applications received.

BERA would expect the grant work to be carried out in the 2020/21 academic year, with the final report being submitted by September 2021. Grant recipients will be assigned a mentor from the BCF steering group, and will work with BERA to publish their final reports.

Applications must make clear how the grant will enable applicants to do the following:

- identify an issue impacting on the development of an aspect of the curriculum in their school/college
- design, implement and evaluate a response to the issue identified
- disseminate the processes and outcomes of the inquiry/investigation within the school/college
- develop a strategy to sustain curriculum investigation/inquiry within the school/college
- contribute to research and scholarship in the study of the curriculum.

While applications are open to collaborative partnerships with higher education institutions, BERA is keen to support research led by schools and colleges, and therefore ask the primary applicant to be based in a school or college.

For more information and to apply visit bera.ac.uk/bcf-cig.

BERA's response

BERA SMALL GRANTS FUND: EDUCATION & COVID-19

BERA has established a small grants fund for research into the impact of Covid-19 on education and/or educational research, in order to support the discipline and lead current debates.

Each award is worth up to £4,000, and at this stage BERA has designated funding for up to three projects. However, if budget allows and there are sufficient high-quality applications BERA Council may choose to make additional awards.

This award is open to single applicants or teams of researchers who are current, individual members of BERA. Awardees will be asked to report on their research in March 2021, either in *Research Intelligence* or in a standalone final report, and at one or more events should circumstances allow.

The deadline for applications is 12 noon, Monday 6 July 2020. For further details see bera.ac.uk/SGF-2020.

COVID-19, EDUCATION & EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: A BERA BLOG SPECIAL ISSUE

At the beginning of April, the BERA Blog put out a call to the BERA community for articles that addressed the Covid-19 crisis. We received a strong response from across the sector: at the time of writing we had published 19 articles, with many more in the pipeline. The resulting special issue summarises new research, finds new applications for existing scholarship, and asks hard questions about both how we have adapted to the crisis and what our objectives are for the world beyond it. For the latest updates see bera.ac.uk/blog-covid-19

BJET & JCAL TEAM UP FOR COVID-19 VIRTUAL ISSUES

As online learning and teaching necessarily came to the fore as we adapted to Covid-19, the editors of the *British Journal of Educational Technology* (*BJET*) and the *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning* (*JCAL*), with our publisher Wiley, produced two complementary free-to-view virtual issues on the role of technology in online education.

Together this collection of 21 papers reflects the journals' strengths across the field of technology-enhanced learning, and provides resources to help teachers, lecturers, practitioners and researchers design and implement online learning. It explores opportunities to develop pedagogy in new and important ways, and advocates nuanced understandings of the roles that a range of technologies can play in learning and teaching practice. The *BJET* papers focus on student experiences and teachers' practices, and the *JCAL* papers discuss the effects of different technological and instructional interventions on student learning.

BERA Conference 2020 cancelled

We hope that all members and planned attendees are now aware that BERA has sadly had to cancel our Annual Conference, due to be held on 8–10 September at the University of Liverpool.

This is a matter of profound regret: we had our usual range of excellent papers and fantastic keynote speakers lined up (we hope to welcome as many of both as possible to our 2021 conference), and were looking forward to this vital annual opportunity for networking and knowledge exchange.

While BERA's Conference and Events Committee concluded that a 'virtual conference' was impractical given the conference's scale, BERA staff are investing time and resources into ensuring that a variety of events can go ahead online over the summer and beyond – see bera.ac.uk/events for the latest updates.

An update from the chair

GERRY CZERNIAWSKI
UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON

Let me start by wishing all colleagues, and your families and friends, safety and wellbeing in these extraordinarily challenging times. In just a matter of weeks our jobs, homes and social norms have transformed at breakneck speed. The boundaries between formal and informal education have swiftly melted away as kitchens and sitting rooms become places of teaching and learning. I am in awe of teachers, parents and carers as they learn, often for the first time, to juggle new forms of curricula, assessment and pedagogy. As a technological dinosaur, I marvel at the many ways in which my university colleagues have rapidly embraced communication technology as we get to grips with online teaching.

At the time of writing BERA has over 2,000 members: a vibrant and diverse research community of researchers, students and teachers. This is, in no small part, testimony to the hard work of the BERA office and the Engagement Committee. We acknowledge the excellent work of BERA's 35 special interest groups (SIGs), its forums and the roles they and their convenors play in increasing membership engagement. Among the many awards and fellowships the Association facilitates, the committee has had the pleasure of overseeing this year's Doctoral, Master's and Public Engagement and Impact awards. We have launched, over the last year, the first BERA Doctoral Fellowships. In the coming months we will be working closely with BERA's Early Career Researcher (ECR) Network to create the Association's first undergraduate research award, and a new mid-career researchers' award is also in the pipeline.

One of the most important functions that the committee oversees is bringing new blood into BERA. We therefore recognise the strategic importance of the ECR Network to increasing membership numbers and engagement, and to the future development of BERA. We are grateful to Oliver Hooper and Yuwei Xu and their network of regional representatives for facilitating the Network's many activities and publications. The British Curriculum Forum (BCF) also plays a significant role, championing and promoting the research capacity of teachers in all phases of education. It holds events on Saturdays in schools to attract as many practitioners as possible, and fosters future research capacity with its publications, awards and grants: it has just launched the latest BCF Curriculum Investigation Grant to support research led by schools and colleges focussing on curriculum inquiry and investigation.

At the time of writing BERA has over 2,000 members: a vibrant and diverse research community of researchers, students and teachers.

I would like to thank Nick Johnson and David Chatterjee for their invaluable support and input into the work of this committee. Our thanks go to all BERA event facilitators and their attendees who have patiently dealt with the consequences of event cancellation (or reconfiguration) due to Covid-19. My thanks also to Ruth Boyask, Oliver Hooper, Kevin Smith, and Marlon Moncrieff for all their work as committee members, and to Sarah Fleming, BERA's membership and engagement manager. We also look forward to Carmel Capewell and Jan Georgeson joining the committee later this year – their expertise will be much needed and appreciated.

There is plenty more to be done by the committee as education, and society at large, navigates unchartered territory. More to be done to increase engagement across the four nations; more to be done to support BERA's international strategy; and, in particular, much more to do to support new research and those new to research. Who can predict what lies ahead in relation to formal, informal, mainstream and alternative educational provision (or indeed the utility of these binary distinctions)? However, I am convinced – now more than ever – that BERA and its membership possesses the expertise, creativity and determination to generate research that can meet the challenges ahead.

IN MEMORY OF

Professor Harvey Goldstein

(1939–2020)

GEMMA MOSS
INTERNATIONAL LITERACY CENTRE, UCL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

Harvey Goldstein, who has died at the age of 80, will be remembered for his formidable legacy both as a statistician and as a campaigner for more careful scrutiny of assessment data in education, the misuse of which he consistently questioned.

Harvey's career included posts at the UCL Institute of Child Health (ICH); as professor of statistical methods at the Institute of Education, University of London, between 1977 and 2004; and, from 2005, as professor of social statistics at the School of Education, University of Bristol, where he remained working right up until his death. The Centre for Multilevel Modelling (CMM), which he founded and developed, has been pivotal in advancing the application of statistical method to complex problems in health and the social sciences. This issue of *RI* features an article of his, co-written with longtime collaborator at CMM, George Leckie, about their award-winning research into the inequity of Progress 8 as a measure of school performance (see pages 10–11).

Harvey represented a rare combination of statistical insight, rigour and inventiveness, coupled with a fierce desire to call out the abuse of data in public debate and to broaden conceptions of what evidence-informed policy should look like. In all these ways he was a committed activist, applying his insights in education to practical problems that stood to benefit from such close scrutiny.

His 2019 Otto Wolff lecture, 'Living by the evidence', delivered at the ICH to celebrate his 80th birthday, shows many of these qualities (see Goldstein, 2020). It is an impassioned plea for public policy decisions to be influenced not just by the research evidence but also by 'priorities, feasibility, acceptability, ethics' – all of which he considered matters of judgement and, in that sense, political.

As a researcher, he had a sustained track record of making a difference through the problems he chose to work on and the ways in which he interacted with policymakers to try to bring about change. The thorny issue of school rankings and what he saw as the misuse of performance data as crude accountability measures played a central part in his work in education (see for instance Leckie & Goldstein, 2017). He was equally forthright in his criticisms of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the limitations of the statistical techniques it used to compare country performance.

Among those who will miss him most are the BERA expert panel who worked with him on the publication, *A baseline without basis* (Goldstein, Moss, Sammons, Sinnott & Stobart, 2018), which drew on his expertise to set out a comprehensive case against baseline testing. Recently reconvened to develop an alternative to SATs, using national sampling rather than whole-population testing, the panel and its work will continue. As Harvey himself said in his Otto Wolff lecture:

> **'The important thing for researchers is to not give up. The research and the publicising of the implications of that research, along with public critiques of evidence abuse or suppression, need to continue. All of this is difficult, but I think there is an ethical imperative to try to do it. And I hope to be involved in doing just that.' – *Goldstein, 2020***

We will keep in mind his fearless approach to tackling politically sensitive issues head-on.

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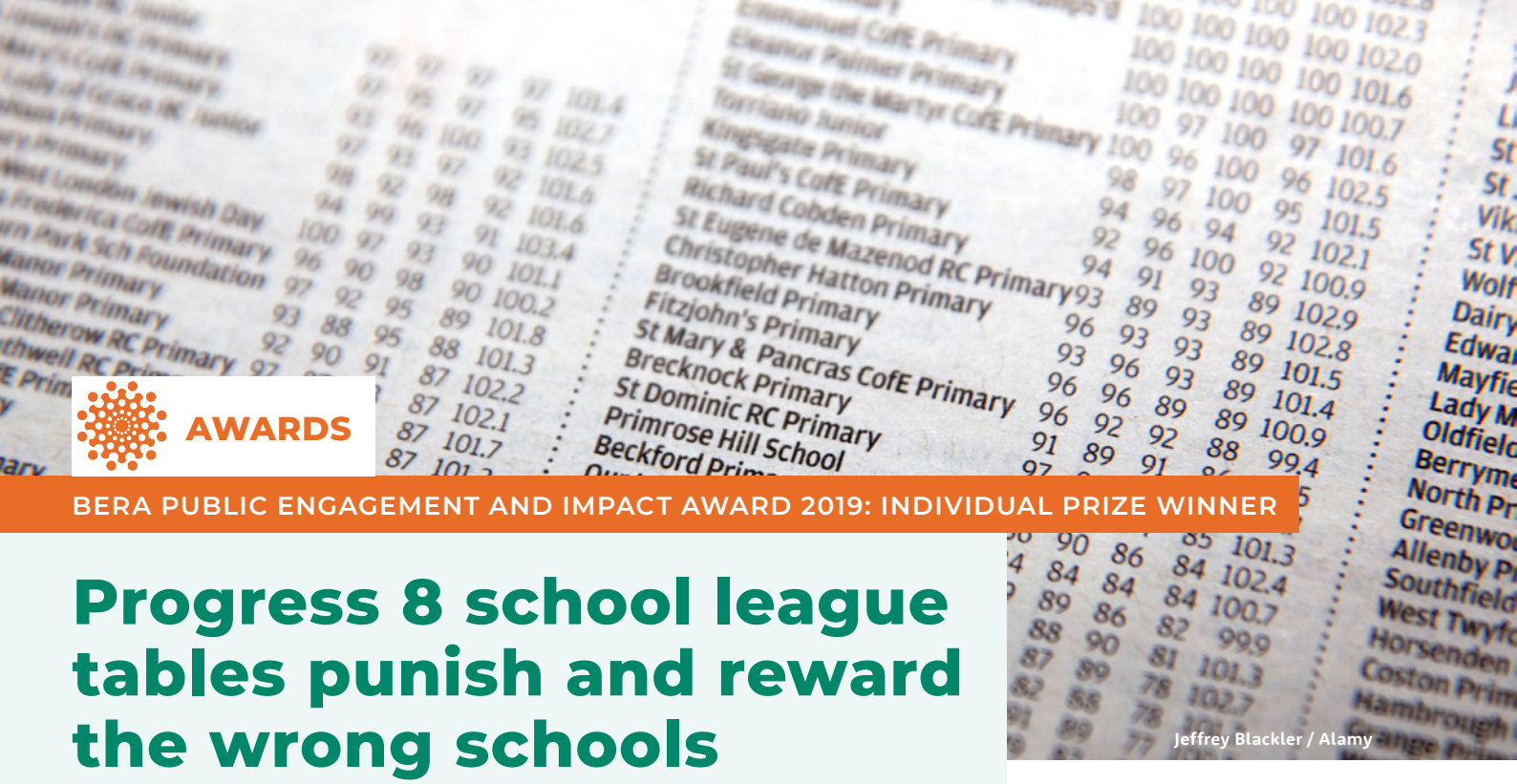

Jeffrey Blackler / Alamy

AWARDS

BERA PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND IMPACT AWARD 2019: INDIVIDUAL PRIZE WINNER

Progress 8 school league tables punish and reward the wrong schools


GEORGE LECKIE & HARVEY GOLDSTEIN
CENTRE FOR MULTILEVEL MODELLING AND
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF BRISTOL

POLICY CONTEXT

Progress 8 is the Department for Education (DfE's) headline school performance and accountability measure for all state secondary schools in England, and is published annually in their school league tables (DfE, 2020). Progress 8 aims to measure the average academic 'progress' pupils make over secondary schooling by comparing their GCSE exam results to their end of primary school key stage 2 (KS2) test results. The DfE and Ofsted both rely heavily on Progress 8 to hold schools to account, therefore schools' futures are very much dictated by this measure.

OUR RESEARCH

Our research shows that Progress 8 is an unfair measure of school performance. While the measure accounts for school intake differences in pupils' KS2 results, it still ignores school intake differences in all pupil background characteristics – yet these also predict why some schools score higher at GCSE than others (Leckie & Goldstein, 2019). This work is part of our broader three-year Economic and Social Research Council-funded project on the school performance tables (Leckie, Goldstein & Prior, 2018).

Progress 8 is biased against schools with above-average proportions of educationally disadvantaged pupil groups, and therefore punishes and rewards the wrong schools.

Our statistical analyses of the DfE's data show that adjusting for pupil background would see the national Progress 8 school league table rankings of one fifth of schools change by over 500 places. Furthermore, 40 per cent of schools judged to be 'underperforming' would move out of this banding. The main driver of these results is that Progress 8 penalises schools that are teaching above-average proportions of white British pupils and those in receipt of free school meals, two pupil groups that struggle nationally. We conclude that Progress 8 is biased against schools with socially disadvantaged pupil groups and therefore punishes and rewards the wrong schools.

We recommend that the DfE adjusts Progress 8 for pupil backgrounds to provide fairer and more meaningful summaries of the impact that schools have on pupil learning. More broadly, however, we argue that far less emphasis should be placed on all school performance measures, as a failure to adjust for pupil background is just one of many statistical and more general concerns that we and others have raised about current high-stakes testing and league tables in England (Leckie & Goldstein, 2017).

OUR IMPACT

Our research has had impact from the start via two-way knowledge exchange meetings with multiple stakeholders. First, we presented to local schools in Bristol, then we shared our initial findings with Ofsted, who prompted us to conduct useful further analyses. We then shared our draft research with the Fischer Family Trust, an organisation that sells performance monitoring tools to schools, and used their feedback to further improve our work. A second meeting with Ofsted helped to refine our analyses. Next, we discussed the relevance of our findings for the Office for Students (OfS) and their related work on measuring university 'learning gains'. Most recently, we had a rich and varied discussion with DfE policy advisors in Westminster around the likely future direction of school performance measures in England.

Adjusting Progress 8 for pupil background would cause the national league table rankings of over one-fifth of schools to change by over 500 places.

The University of Bristol press release of our work led to national radio (Talk Sport and Heart FM), newspaper and online coverage (*Guardian*, *Independent*, *Times* and *Tes*), generating increased public awareness and understanding. Following this media attention, we gave an invited talk to teachers at the National Education Union and presented at a private meeting with the House of Commons Education Select Committee. We have since had a follow-up meeting with Emma Hardy, Labour MP (and now shadow further education and universities minister), which included discussing alternatives to Progress 8 and data-driven school accountability given Labour's May 2019 commitment to scrap KS2 tests (Leckie, Prior & Goldstein, 2019).

Our work has also prompted the Co-op Academies Trust to issue their own press release citing our work, calling for Progress 8 to be adjusted and encouraging other schools to contact us. This led to more media attention, this time in *Tes* and *Schools Week*. Since then we have corresponded with many headteachers who wanted to find out their pupils' background-adjusted Progress 8 scores and asked to be involved in future research. Frank Norris, director of the Co-op Academies Trust, has also discussed our work in a meeting with the then shadow secretary of state for education, Angela Rayner MP, and 25 other Labour MPs. We are planning to present to all Co-op headteachers in Manchester, and Frank Norris will be visiting us in Bristol later in the year.

40%

Percentage of schools judged as 'underperforming' that would move out of this banding were Progress 8 adjusted for pupil background.

We have also collaborated extensively with the Northern Powerhouse Partnership (NPP), which championed our work in an Education Select Committee inquiry on Education in the north [of England] and in a meeting with shadow cabinet members on education and skills. Partnering with the NPP, we have published adjusted Progress 8 scores for all schools in England on a dedicated interactive website (NPP, 2020) as a way of encouraging further debate around concerns with Progress 8 and data-driven accountability, and to place more pressure on the DfE to engage on these issues. Lucy Powell, Labour MP, Education Select Committee member and former shadow secretary of state for education, said in her foreword, 'This is a ground-breaking piece of work by the Northern Powerhouse Partnership with Bristol University' (NPP, 2020). The press release led to further media coverage by the BBC, *Independent*, *Financial Times* and *Tes*.

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AWARDS

BERA PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND IMPACT AWARD 2019: TEAM PRIZE WINNER

Inspiring and supporting schools to maximise the impact of teaching assistants

ROB WEBSTER, JONATHAN SHARPLES, PAULA BOSANQUET, SALLY FRANKLIN & MATTHEW PARKER
UCL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

Teaching assistants (TAs) are seen by schools as essential for improving the participation and achievement of disadvantaged pupils, and particularly those with special educational needs (SEN). The effective deployment of TAs has been a preoccupation of school leaders in England for over a decade, triggered largely by two developments.

The first is the policy focus on outcomes for disadvantaged learners via the 'pupil premium' grant. In its early years, schools spent most of this additional funding on TAs (NAO, 2015). Today, the proportion of the mainstream school workforce employed as TAs (26 per cent) is one of the largest anywhere in the world; on the basis of headcount, it is (at 331,000) roughly equivalent to the population of Iceland.

26%

Proportion of mainstream school workforce employed as TAs.

The employment and deployment of TAs to support lower-attaining disadvantaged pupils extends the longer standing practice of using TAs to facilitate the inclusion and learning of children and young people with SEN. The emergence of empirical evidence on the impact of this arrangement is the second reason for schools' heightened interest in TAs.

When the pupil premium was introduced, research came to prominence demonstrating a troubling relationship between the amount of support pupils receive from TAs and their academic outcomes. Results from the landmark Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project (2003–2009) found that TA support had a negative impact on progress, with the effect particularly marked for pupils with SEN (Blatchford et al., 2011).

A key conclusion from this large-scale, multi-method UK research was that TAs cannot easily outperform or compensate for school leaders' ineffective decision-making about TA deployment and preparation. The findings prompted members of the research team to work with school leaders to address the strategic and practical challenges arising directly from the DISS

project (Webster, Blatchford & Russell, 2013). This collaborative work evolved into a comprehensive, integrated programme called Maximising the Impact of Teaching Assistants (MITA).

MITA brings to life the principles and processes from the post-DISS developmental work with schools captured in an eponymously titled handbook for school leaders (Webster, Russell & Blatchford, 2016). This strategic work is combined with and complemented by practical guidance contained in another book aimed at TAs on improving their interactions with pupils (Bosanquet, Radford & Webster, 2016).

Since 2014, we have delivered our leadership and training courses to over 600 schools from Jersey to the Orkney Islands. We have also greatly increased system capacity across the UK by licensing 70 experienced practitioners to deliver our training, enabling thousands of TAs to benefit from our work.

The reach of our work has been further facilitated by our partnership with the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). The classroom-tested strategies from MITA formed the basis of evidence-based recommendations contained in the EEF's first-ever guidance report. A copy of *Making best use of teaching assistants* (Sharples, Webster & Blatchford, 2015) was sent to every school in England.

Our two-way dialogue with the sector has added enormous value to the programme itself.

The EEF guidance and MITA have been central to two large-scale regional campaigns which have actively transformed perceptions and practices in schools relating to the role and potential of TAs. An independent evaluation of the campaign involving 480 Yorkshire schools found a small but extensive impact on primary pupil attainment in English when TA deployment was aligned with our guidance (Sharples, 2019). Results from an efficacy trial of MITA itself, funded by the EEF, will be published in autumn 2020.

We are especially proud that, as well as the all-important impact, this BERA Award acknowledges the value and importance of our public engagement. With so many policies and priorities competing for schools' attention, it can be challenging for researchers to get school leaders to notice their work, let alone to act on it. We deliberately connect the benefits of MITA with the issues and concerns uppermost in school leaders' minds (for example, teacher workload and wellbeing).

We also make sure our messages are positioned wherever school leaders are most likely to find them: in the publications they read, the websites they visit and the podcasts they listen to. A dedicated website and an active social media presence provides high visibility and engagement at low cost.

Ten years ago the DISS project findings made headlines that cast doubt on the value of TAs. A decade on, MITA is almost fully integrated into the bloodstream of educational debates and school practice, and is having a positive influence in the UK and beyond – a version of the EEF guidance, contextualised for schools in Australia, was published in late 2019.

Our two-way dialogue with the sector has added enormous value to the programme itself, creating a virtuous cycle through which our work is improving TA deployment in classrooms. In turn, the feedback from schools is improving the coverage, delivery and impact of MITA.

Further resources:
maximisingtas.co.uk
@MITAproject

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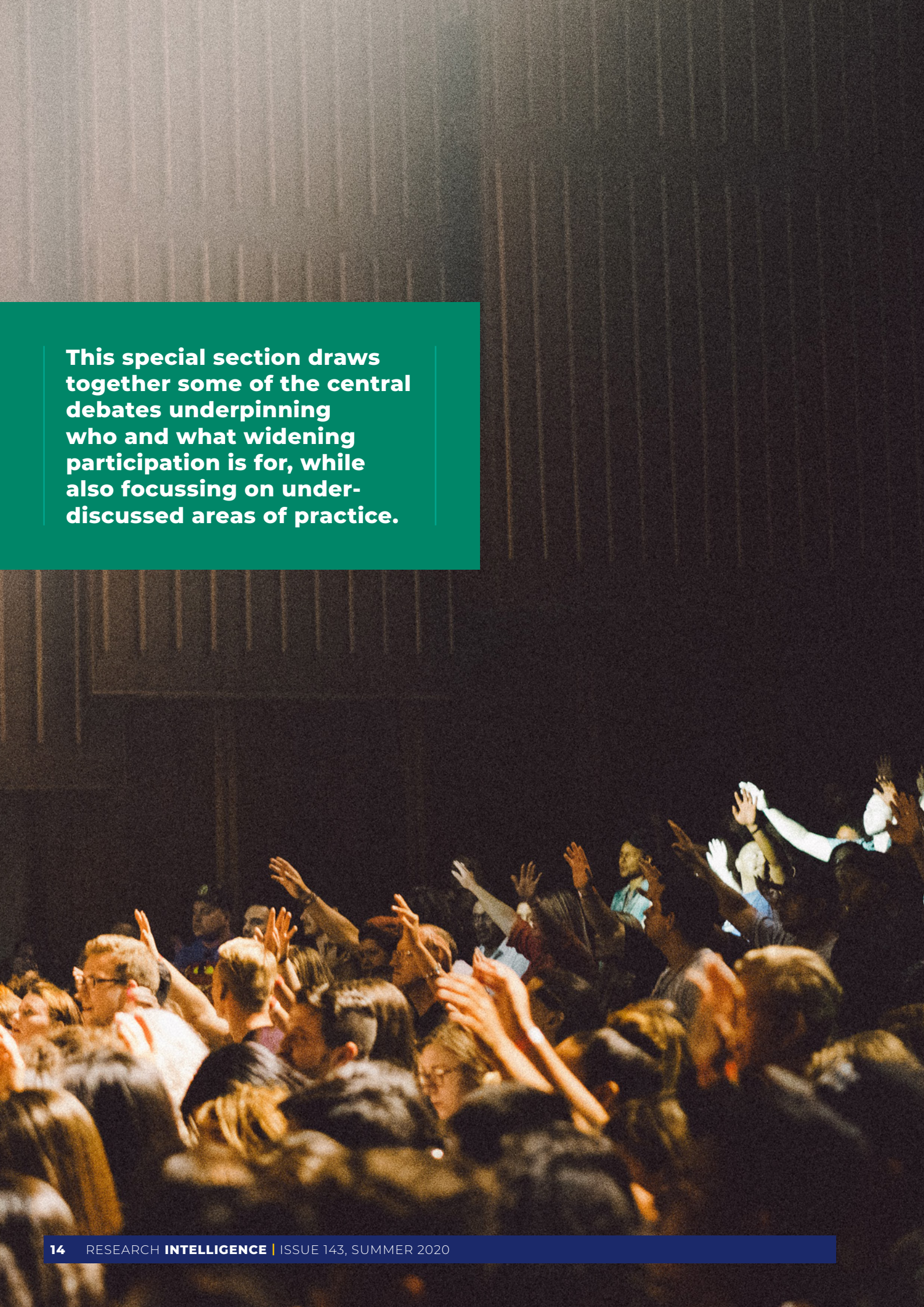

This special section draws together some of the central debates underpinning who and what widening participation is for, while also focussing on under-discussed areas of practice.

EDITORIAL

Widening participation in practice


JON RAINFORD & COLIN MCCAIG
UNIVERSITY OF BEDFORDSHIRE &
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This special section brings together a diverse range of voices to discuss the practice and operationalisation of widening participation in higher education (HE). It draws together some of the central debates underpinning who and what widening participation is for, while also focussing the lens on areas of practice that are frequently under-discussed, such as those involving the third sector and the coalface of practice. The contributors within it range from established voices within HE research – some of whom have a national profile in the evaluation of outreach – to teachers and practitioners living the daily reality of enacting these policy agendas.

Many things have changed over the more than 20 years in which widening participation has been central to HE policy, not least the increasing marketisation of the sector, and in his article **Colin McCaig** unpicks prevailing discourses of widening participation in England to consider exactly who we are widening participation for. **Sol Gamsu**'s piece on social mobility focusses on the distorting effect of the policy focus on progression to 'elite' institutions, often at the expense of any critique of the systemic inequalities inherent in the education landscape.

Staying with the theme of central debates, **Julian Crockford**'s article addresses a core issue of current policy in this area: the growing importance of the role of effective evaluation of activities. This is seen as important to funders, but also to those of us working directly with young people – nobody in the world of outreach wants to be delivering interventions that don't actually help.

However, many aspects of policy and practice in widening participation are based upon notions that have become accepted truths, despite a lack of evidence that they are effective. Two articles within this issue tackle some of these taken-for-granted ideas. **Neil Harrison and Jon Rainford** problematise the notion of 'raising aspirations' and argue that a new theoretical framework of 'possible selves' might better inform outreach work. Similarly, **Sean Demack** in his article problematises the categorisation of black, Asian and minority ethnic young people as one homogenous group. He highlights how a focus on the overarching term 'BAME' masks the structural realities of the role that ethnicity plays in both access and degree attainment.

The experiences of teachers and practitioners are key to discussion of these issues, yet practitioners can often feel divorced from research and evaluation findings. **Rae Tooth**, in her article, discusses the 'pracademic' project that set out to address this by encouraging more engagement with, and participation in, scholarly research among the practitioner community. Furthermore, **Roberts Zivtins** brings the voice of teachers to the fore by highlighting what they actually want from these interventions, and how this may sit in tension with institutional perceptions of what the focus of outreach should be.

Many things have changed over the more than 20 years in which widening participation has been central to HE policy.

Often marginalised in these discussions is the role of further education. **Peter Wolstencroft and Leanne De Main** bring the focus back to this with their case study of a progression partnership between King Edward College and Coventry University that demonstrates how partnership working can have a real impact on the opportunities open to students in further education. Continuing this focus on marginalised actors, **Ruth Squire** highlights the increasingly key role that third sector organisations play in this work, and explores their specific perspectives.

In bringing together these voices, we hope this issue will stimulate thought and discussion concerning whose voices are represented within policy and research, and how future research in these areas could and should find ways to capture a more diverse picture of the sector.

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WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN PRACTICE

A focus on access to elite institutions distracts from more fundamental inequities in HE

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Widening participation is considered a vehicle for improving social mobility. Concern for social mobility has, in practice, meant a narrow focus on fairer entry to elite universities; this has dominated the past decade of policy discourse around access and inequality in higher education (HE).

We need to reflect on how we can situate our research within an alternative politics of access which allows us to ask bigger questions about inequality and HE, and ask whether a focus on elite universities feeding into elite professions actually enables social mobility or simply acts as competitive cream-skimming while ticking the 'access' box. As a sociologist of education working at an elite university, the urgency of the need to broaden access and make my own institution (Durham University) more inclusive has been put into sharp relief by the stories I've heard from my students. Their experiences of classism, racism and sexism highlight just how hostile elite universities still are. The Office for Students (OfS) has set Durham a target of shifting the ratio of its students who come from neighbourhoods in quintile 5 of the participation of local areas (POLAR) measure to those from quintile 1 neighbourhoods from 10:1 to 3:1 (McKie, 2020). This target poses all sorts of institutional challenges, and would require seismic changes in an elite, and elitist, collegiate university.

> **Does it really make sense to concentrate financial resources and cultural prestige on a small group of universities who, despite practitioners' best efforts, have a terrible record on access?**

These immediate practical questions go to the very heart of debates over what access means and how educational researchers write, research and work. The central tension that I want to highlight here is the unhealthy policy and media obsession with access to elite universities, and how this can obscure the question of inequalities between institutions and types of institution. Earlier generations of scholars also asked these questions. Scholars from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) criticised the narrow focus of postwar sociologists of education on fair access to secondary schooling. Underpinning these analyses was not 'a

politics of class but [...] a politics of status', in which the major concern was with equality of opportunity and greater social mobility (CCCS, 1981, pp. 84–85). Fundamental questions, such as 'whether there was something problematic about there being [a] working class [...] in the first place' were not a matter of concern; 'what kind of society was in fact being reproduced, was not the subject of deep questioning' (CCCS, 1981, p. 138).

Access may now concentrate on HE, but the questions posed by the CCCS are fundamentally the same. Contextualised admissions may have been one of the biggest policy wins of a difficult decade for progressive educationalists, but this has occurred in a policy context in which 'social mobility' and access to elite institutions and elite jobs has been the dominant policy discourse (Lane, 2015; Rainford, 2017; Ingram & Allen, 2019). Meanwhile, inequalities between institutions and deeper inequalities of class and race are ignored. The OfS (2019) recently described 'a new approach' to access with greater emphasis on mature students, but in the time of Covid-19 it seems unlikely that this will involve any deeper acknowledgement of the need to challenge institutional inequalities and hierarchies.

The role of educational researchers in this context is not neutral. Many of us are engaged practically in the access activities of our own universities. However, we are also involved in the creation of policy research that can reinforce the narrow obsession with access to elite universities and employers. The Social Mobility Commission (SMC) and the Sutton Trust have been the two principal commissioners of public-facing, policy-oriented research in this area. Multiple reports by both the SMC (2019) and Sutton Trust (2012) have extensively documented unequal access to elite universities and professions. However, the *existence* of institutional hierarchies, with elite institutions serving as the primary conduits into professional employment and positions of power, is not considered a problem. What matters here is whether entry to these circuits of power, which move young people from elite universities into powerful and comfortable forms of employment, can be made fair.

These reports effectively sidestep the issue of whether elite institutions and the elitism they embody and uphold are sensible ways to organise an educational system. Does it really make sense to concentrate financial resources and cultural prestige on a small group of universities who, despite practitioners' best efforts, have a terrible record on access? Of course, as a transitional and urgent demand, elite HE institutions should be opened up. But in committing to this in our research and our access activities we must, to paraphrase the CCCS, reflect on what system of HE we are in fact reproducing.

Without attaching access and widening participation to structural transformation and the dismantling of cultures of elitism and institutional hierarchy, it is not clear that there is in fact any radical goal or endpoint. Efforts to change the intake of elite institutions may be transformative for individuals and the institutions themselves, but on their own they do not offer the possibility of systemic change. They fail to ask, or even allow, the fundamental question: Do we actually need elites and elite institutions at all?

Our problem, then, is to respond pragmatically now but also to develop a more transformative and structural approach to the politics of access. We can and should continue to demand wider access, but this must be embedded within a politics that seeks to erode institutional hierarchies of cultural and economic wealth. On a practical level that means pushing for broader conceptions of access that celebrate and value post-1992 universities, further education colleges, other new providers and lifelong learning. Solidarity between institutions, researchers and practitioners is paramount. Doing this requires multiple struggles – over what we research and how, over how we *do* widening participation within our institutions, and over how we build political movements that seek to contest and ultimately transform the unequal terrain of HE. None of this is easy in the current environment, but we have no other choice.

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Who are we widening participation for?

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Before considering who we are widening participation (WP) for, we need to think about what WP is and how we do it. Etymologically, WP has its origins in the political need to *increase* participation, going back before the Robbins report (Committee on Higher Education, 1963), which came up against various structural constraints that policymakers had to address. More places were needed than universities were willing to make available, and more people had to seek entry to higher education (HE), meaning governments had to think more broadly about who should be attracted into the system. Socially, participation had to *widen* in order to increase and, as universities' autonomy over admissions was inviolable, it fell to state sector polytechnics, further education colleges and the Open University to show the way.

WP is about bringing into the system people from all social categories underrepresented due to the selectivity of a rationed system. This is an inherently political project based partly on human capital theory but equally on notions of social justice: simply, as Robbins noted, nobody should be denied, due to their background, the opportunity to achieve their educational potential, and the system should be expanded to create places for all who desire the opportunity.

> **There are still severe inequalities in access and participation, especially in the more selective parts of the system.**

The relative success of this project means that nobody would think of denying access to HE on the basis of age, gender, ethnicity, disability and so on – indeed, thanks to the Equality Act 2010, such discrimination is illegal. Nor is it acceptable, as it was before the Office for Fair Access was established in 2004, for research-intensive universities to ignore WP on the basis that they have to maintain global excellence via high entry requirements (McCaig, 2015).

Nevertheless, there are still severe inequalities in access and participation, especially in the more selective parts of the system. More outreach work is now carried out by selective institutions, often accompanied by a more thorough approach to evaluation than found elsewhere (Harrison et al., 2018), yet most is designed to attract those from disadvantaged backgrounds who have already demonstrated their likelihood to attain the requisite A-level grades and participate in HE anyway. Such outreach work is either market-competitive or 'deadweight' in WP terms (Chowdry, Dearden, Jin & Lloyd, 2012).

So who are we widening participation for? Is it WP if we merely shuffle some of the 'deserving poor' from one highly selective institution to another?

I would argue that we only *widen* participation when we reach those who would not have participated without intervention.

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Evaluation of widening participation

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Concern with evaluation in higher education (HE) regulation has intensified over the last decade-and-a-half. Initially, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) was most concerned with tracking and monitoring spend (OFFA, 2004). In 2013, however, it noted that evaluation was 'vital if we are to improve understanding of what works best... and demonstrate... the value of investment' (OFFA, 2013).

The sector has struggled with developing effective evaluation approaches to complex widening participation (WP) activities and a tension between two different positions remains.

Commentators such as the Sutton Trust (Torgerson, Gascoine, Heaps, Menzies & Younger, 2014) and the Education Policy Institute (Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020) suggested that much WP evaluation was poor quality because, as Gorard and Smith (2006) stated, it lacked 'controlled interventions' or 'suitable comparators even in passive designs'. The ideal model is exemplified by the What Works Network, launched to develop a robust evidence base for policymakers through 'randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and the more systematic analysis of what is working where, and why' (2018).

From within the sector, however, there was pushback to such quasi-scientific approaches, with some evaluators agreeing with Harrison and Waller (2017) that 'generating unequivocal evidence in complex social fields is notoriously difficult'. As an alternative, proponents pointed to a plurality of other qualitative and quantitative evaluation methodologies.

At the heart of this tension is an ongoing lack of clarity about the rationale for evaluation. Policymakers tend to prefer 'robust' evaluation and a clear narrative. They are also concerned with value for money, underpinned by a questionable assumption about the generalisability of individual activities – namely that if an intervention has proven impact in one situation then it can be profitably transferred to other contexts with equal success.

Opponents argue that a broader epistemology is required – an interest in *why* an intervention works and in what contexts. There is an increasing turn towards theory-driven approaches, such as Pawson and Tilley's (1997), viewed as a means of both addressing the complexity of WP interventions and unpacking the 'mechanisms' that generate success, making it easier to identify which *components* might work elsewhere.

There is room for both evaluation cultures in the effort to concentrate resources where they can most benefit disadvantaged young people, but the sector will deliver more effective evaluation if it has a clear idea for whom and why it is evaluating, and how its findings will be used.

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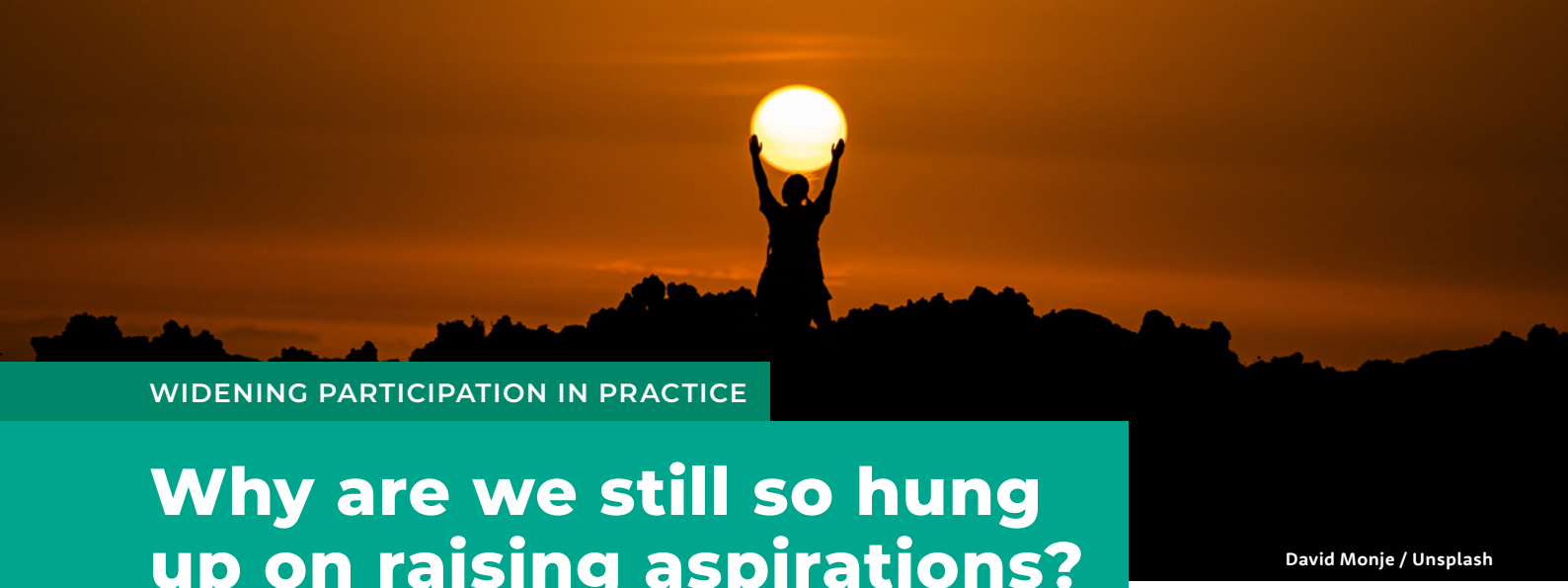

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WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN PRACTICE

Why are we still so hung up on raising aspirations?


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Well-informed decision-making is the current focus of the Office for Students' (2020) Uni Connect programme to increase the diversity of participants in higher education. This is underpinned by comments by the Director for Fair Access and Participation that low aspirations do not compromise decision-making – instead, cultural, financial and academic barriers are the issue. Indeed, despite 20 years of focus on a 'raising aspirations' agenda, little has changed in terms of participation, especially for elite universities.

Focussing on aspirations is, however, often comfortable for institutions (Harrison & Waller, 2017). It is conceptually simple and draws on 'common sense' ideas about how meritocracies work – high achievers aspire high, don't they? It also gives institutions licence to locate 'the problem' with young people and not with wider reproductive systems of inequality, of which universities are arguably part. Furthermore, 'raising aspirations' has also become a catch-all for a plethora of work that is often complex and hard to reduce into simple descriptions. In a recent study with practitioners, work badged as aspiration-raising was often actually focussed more on helping young people understand how to realise their aspirations (Rainford, 2019). Why then does the unhelpful terminology persist?

It is clear to us that we need a new conceptual framework. The renewed focus on decision-making may be a step in the right direction. However, there is more to decisions than information. For example, the expectations of parents, teachers and the wider community that surrounds them weigh heavily on young people. One potential framework is the theory of possible selves (Harrison, 2018). This argues that we all have like-to-be and like-to-avoid visions of ourselves in the future that motivate us in the present. It acknowledges that young people need information about potential adult futures, but that they take decisions in contexts that limit what seems possible, probable or desirable.

Outreach informed by the theory of possible selves focusses on helping young people to identify what they value for their futures, building agency and supporting them to devise their own pathways to achieving a like-to-be adult self. This shift in focus helps young people come to their own conclusions about whether higher education will help them get where they want to be – as opposed to selling a degree as an end in itself. Crucially, it also sees institutions engaging closely with adult influencers who shape expectations about what is possible, rather than berating and demeaning young people for not aspiring high enough.

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A convenient paradox?

Statistics and white advantage in UK degree attainment

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Recent years have seen growing attention paid to differences in degree attainment across student ethnic groups in UK higher education (HE) policy and research. This is understandable: in the UK, white students are more likely to attain a first or upper-second-class degree than any other ethnic group, and this pattern has been present for at least 15 years. Such persistent white advantage is unique to HE – there is more complexity in the relationships between educational success and ethnicity at all other levels of education. Prior to HE, on average some ethnic groups (such as Indian pupils) attain relatively higher levels of success while others (for example, black Caribbean pupils) attain relatively lower levels compared with white British pupils.

The attention on ethnicity and success in HE has prompted actions in HE institutions (HEIs), including changes to pedagogy, reading lists and the learning and wider HE environment, and providing space/time for discussing ethnicity, racism and culture. These actions may lead to change; however, poor statistical practice is undermining attempts to 'know' the structural realities of entrenched white advantage.

> **Poor statistical practice is undermining attempts to 'know' the structural realities of entrenched white advantage.**

Having observed patterns of success across ethnic groups prior to HE for 20 years, I first examined patterns at degree level in 2015 within two 'black and minority ethnic (BME) attainment' projects involving four HEIs in England. I was astonished to see widespread use of a binary 'white/BME' classification. Statistical problems arising from highly aggregated data have been discussed for over a century. Beyond weaknesses in measurement validity, aggregated data are prone to create a statistical paradox/artifice first highlighted by Yule in 1903 and described by Simpson in 1951. 'Simpson's paradox' (Wagner, 1982) was one reason for the rise of multilevel statistical techniques in the 1980s and 1990s. In summary, it is possible for analyses of aggregated data to completely contradict that of disaggregated data, meaning that BME classification can be used to show a declining pattern of white advantage when, in reality, across more defined groups it increases. This has serious implications for attempts to evaluate the impact of any BME-focussed action on degree attainment.

This is one of many statistical 'horror shows' in HE statistics that are out of line with beliefs around academic rigour and standards in UK HE (Harrison, 2012; Harrison, & McCaig, 2015). On grounds of measurement validity and statistical theory, there are no justifications for using a binary ethnicity classification. Using BME classification results in research that understates the extent of white advantage, and Simpson's paradox serves to cloud things further. This may be politically convenient for some; for others it undermines belief in a sincere desire for change.

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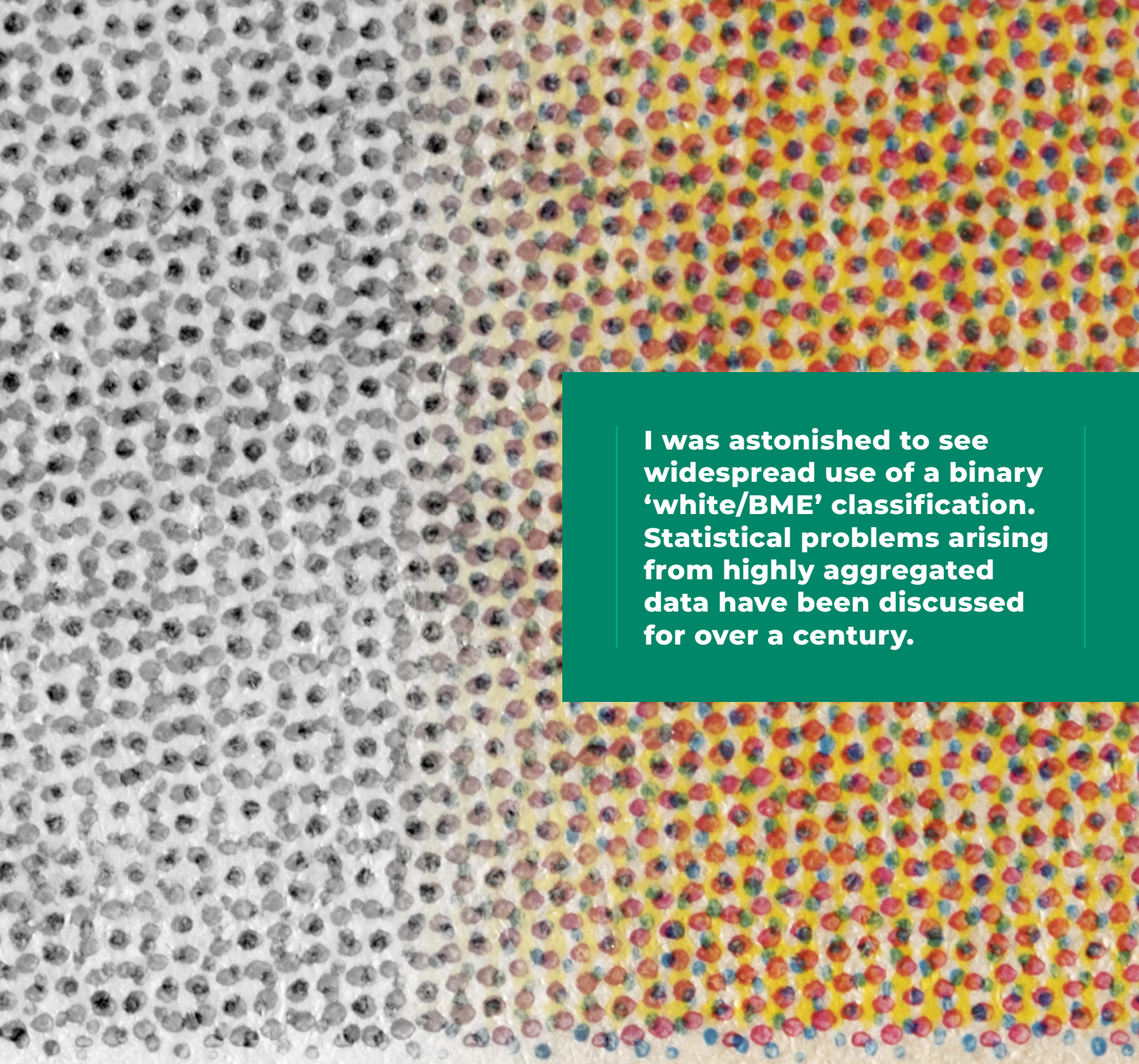

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Silos are for farms

Let's break down the barriers between research, policy and delivery

RAE TOOTH
VILLIERS PARK

Villiers Park is a national charity that empowers disadvantaged young people to succeed and have confident futures by discovering the skills and knowledge they need to become the leaders of tomorrow. As its chief executive, I am more aware than ever of the need for dialogue and shared knowledge between practitioner, policy and academic communities.

I come from a policy background, but the work I led at the Office for Fair Access focussed on this collaborative approach, and in the process coined a new term – 'pracademic' – to describe those committed to real-world delivery underpinned by academic rigour. This groundbreaking programme, in partnership with Professor Jaqueline Stevenson in England and Professor Penny Jane-Burke in Australia, resulted in well-received and influential publications (Bennett, Burke, Stevenson, & Tooth, 2018; Stevenson, Tooth, Bennett, & Burke, 2018).

> **I am more aware than ever of the need for dialogue and shared knowledge between practitioner, policy and academic communities.**

Charities such as Villiers Park rely heavily on philanthropic donations, and so come from a culture of demonstrating impact. The knowledge we gain is often limited to developing our own practice and supporting future bids for funding. Like other organisations, we find ourselves in politically dicey water if we want to take calculated risks piloting innovative interventions when our reputation is built on consistent success – a challenge not so different to that faced by schools, further education colleges or higher education providers. How, then, can we ensure that our wealth of knowledge – built up, in Villiers Park's case, over more than a century of working with disadvantaged young people – is accessible to policymakers and academics, as well as supporting our own practice and that of similar organisations?

Rather than research being 'nice to have', it must become an integral part of how practitioners learn and work. We cannot be expected to cast around for research that fits our aims and supports our claims, and selectively shoehorn it into funding bids. Moreover, our responsibility as change-agents for a fairer society requires us to not only deliver interventions that we know work and develop new ones that are context-specific and evidence-based, but also to engage in broader knowledge growth. After all, the barriers to social mobility do not exist in a vacuum.

Our new 2020–2025 strategy builds in the capacity for knowledge generation in areas germane to the young people we seek to serve. Consequently I am thrilled that a long-held ambition has come to fruition: over the next four years, a PhD student based at the Rees Centre, University of Oxford will work directly with Villiers Park staff and students as we develop our offer for care-experienced young people.

This is an important step in what I believe will be a new cross-sector working paradigm (charities, academics, policymakers and education providers) which will deliver exceptional value and life-changing opportunities, and not just for our students. It is only through spaces that are open to all these perspectives that we will deliver real change in outcomes.

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Rather than research being 'nice to have', it must become an integral part of how practitioners learn and work.

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What teachers want from STEM outreach

Authentic science experiences, not curricular outcomes

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UK teachers are heavily incentivised to focus educational efforts on curricular outcomes and helping students to gain qualifications. However, in recent interviews, teachers who bring students to science outreach sessions have rejected curricular gains as their main motivation for engaging with the programme, in favour of an authentic university lab experience.

It is widely recognised that students from certain socio-demographic groups are underrepresented in science. Attempting to address this inequality, universities have embarked on widening participation (WP) programmes. A central element of Imperial College London's WP initiative is the Wohl Reach Out Lab (WROL), a laboratory custom-designed to give visiting students practical science experiences.

As part of my doctoral research I have been interviewing teachers who bring students to the WROL as a collaborative outreach project between Imperial and a local secondary school. I aimed to understand teachers' motivations: what do they hope their students gain from coming onto campus and doing practical science?

Teachers almost unanimously rejected curricular outcomes; the following quotes demonstrate the general sentiment.

> **'I think that [visiting the WROL] really gets to the heart of science... it's not really content.'**

> **'...from my perspective [students] come to experiment, to find stuff out, rather than just because it's part of their curriculum.'**

Considering the time and effort dedicated by teachers to helping their students understand curricular concepts, these comments were surprising. Why wouldn't teachers want outreach sessions to reassert curricular concepts if this might lead to better exam outcomes? What alternative benefits come from visiting the WROL?

Exploring teachers' comments further revealed how they were critical of 'school science'. Teachers protested the lack of time, resources or sometimes subject-specific knowledge required to complete practical science in school and lamented this missed opportunity. This led to teachers remarking that school science lacks authenticity:

> **'...the pressures on the A-level courses [are] very much based on formal learning and that can take away from the real aspects of science.'**

This view contrasts directly with the comments of teachers about the authentic science experiences in the WROL:

> **'...science in the WROL is not this theoretical thing that we try and get into students' heads, science is just what they do all day, and students see that real-world application.'**

While criticism of school science is nothing new (Jenkins, 2007), when considered within an outreach context these findings are important. Outreach practitioners must reflect that teachers visit the WROL precisely because it *isn't* school. Previous research (Bruce, Bruce, Conrad & Huang, 1997) has shown that science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) ambassadors tend to replicate their experiences from the classroom. More of the same isn't what's desired or required.

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Colin Underhill / Alamy

The role of further education in widening participation

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'I would not have gone to university without King Edward College.' Jamie, a second-year undergraduate studying for a business degree at Coventry University, is unequivocal with his words. The first person in his family to go to university, his achievements, and those of his peers, are the embodiment of an aspirational partnership between the college and the university aimed at promoting higher level study among students in the local area.

King Edward College (known locally as KEC) is based in the borough of Nuneaton and Bedworth, an area of high deprivation that traditionally has had poor attainment at key stage 4. This lack of success has led to low levels of participation in higher education (HE) and an expectation that students will look for employment rather than further their studies.

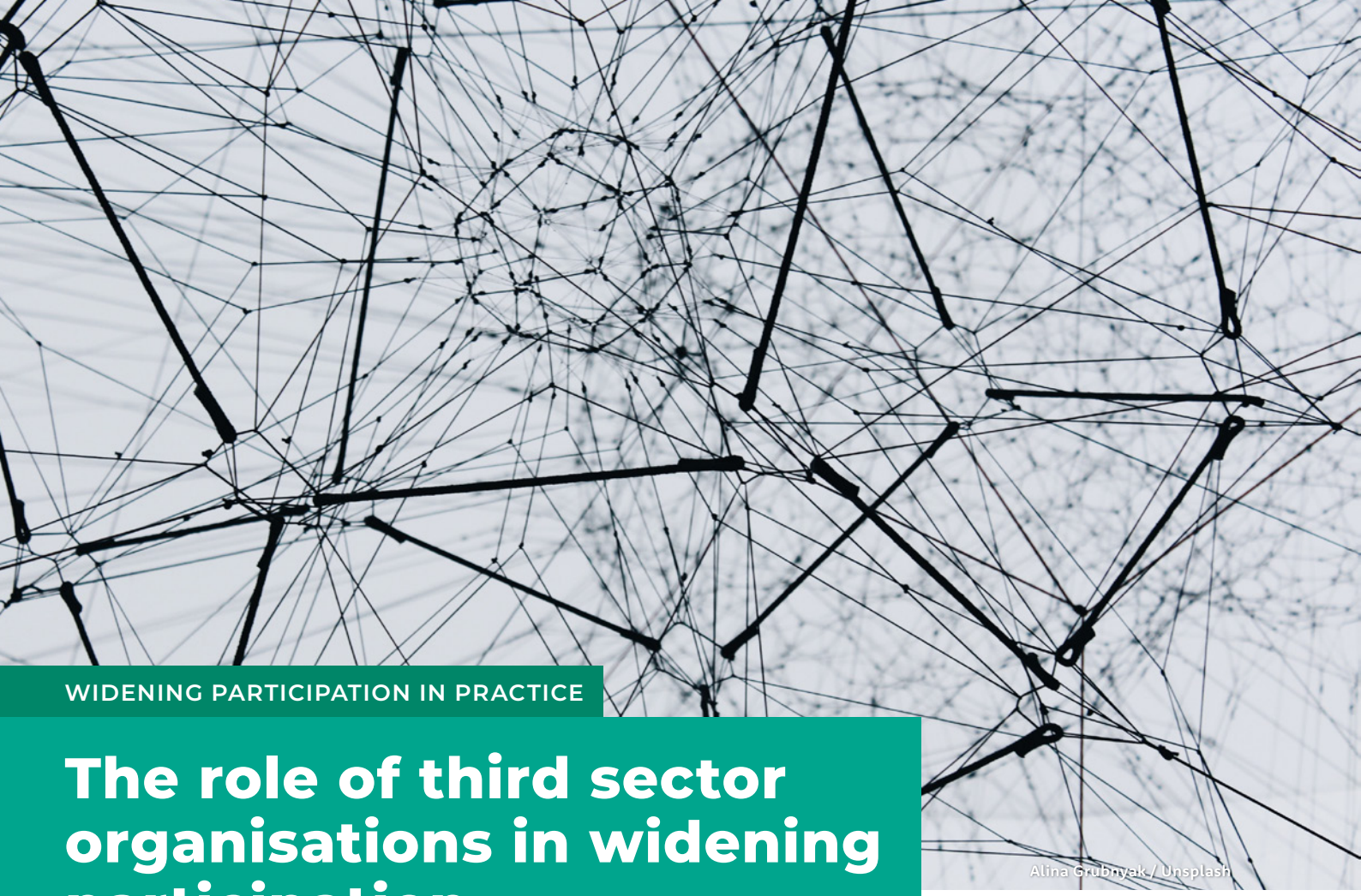
> **A key objective was to give students the skills needed to succeed in HE.**

The partnership consists of a higher national certificate (HNC) in business, taught at KEC and validated by Coventry University. Students who pass the course are guaranteed entry into year two of a business degree at the university. The rationale behind running the HNC at the college is that students are far more likely to apply for a course in an environment where most already study and feel comfortable. Linsey, the course leader, explains that her role, and that of fellow tutor Peter, is to 'build confidence and to show students who otherwise thought higher education was not a possibility, that it is'. Robert, a graduate of the HNC, agreed: 'There was far less anxiety doing the HNC than going straight to university. This was the greatest benefit as uni felt like too much of a jump for me at the time'.

A key objective was to give students the skills needed to succeed in HE. Linsey explains, 'We never spoon-feed, there are very strict rules and our aim is to get them into good routines'. This is backed up by Jamie: 'The support is the main thing, I can't put into words how great the support I got from Linsey and Peter was, it helped me so much'.

The transition to Coventry is carefully managed, with a link tutor visiting KEC on a regular basis and students attending taster sessions at the university. Paul, another graduate of the course, confirmed the success of this approach: 'I felt like the HNC had indeed prepared me for higher level thinking, writing and delivery in the case of presentations, even more so than expected, as some of my peers seemed to struggle with the type of writing that was required for assignments, where to me it otherwise seemed straightforward'.

The continuing success of the programme is demonstrated by increasing applications to the course, the fact that all graduates of the first cohort are on track to achieve good degrees and, most of all, a group of students who would otherwise have been excluded from HE have been able to access locally based, university-level study.



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WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN PRACTICE

The role of third sector organisations in widening participation

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The involvement of third sector organisations in widening participation (WP) is a largely unremarked-upon phenomenon. Delivery of WP by charities, particularly in adult education and early iterations of Aimhigher, has a long history and is, for many institutions, an embedded part of their outreach work. However, the past 20 years has seen a rise in the number of charities focussed on higher education (HE) access, and they are taking on ever more varied roles. Funded mostly by a mix of grants, donations and payment for services, their activities include delivering interventions, commissioning and undertaking research, funding bursaries, convening policy and practitioner networks, lobbying and advocacy. Most of these organisations deliver activity to encourage and prepare young people to enter university, particularly the most selective universities and professions, though there are also those that focus on career outcomes, advocacy or research.

The work of third sector organisations on WP can tend to be viewed as separate to that of HE institutions (HEIs), but this can limit knowledge exchange, understanding of the challenges they face and critical scrutiny. Just as researchers such as Ball (for example, 2008) and Williamson (for example, 2014) have explored the roles of non-governmental organisations in education policy development and enactment, I suggest it is also time for us to look more closely at the current landscape of large, politically active and well-networked organisations playing a part in WP in England. Based on ongoing research examining 24 such organisations,[1] I suggest there are three areas in which they are and will continue to be important in shaping the possible futures of WP work: as deliverers, as influencers and as evaluators.

AS DELIVERERS

Third sector organisations (TSOs) are some of the largest providers of WP outreach activity, often in collaboration with universities, schools and employers. The recently rebranded Uni Connect programme involved 47 charities in phase one consortia (Office for Students, 2019), and university access and participation plans describe a variety of collaborative and contractor

relationships with TSOs. As with HEIs, TSOs face pressures to conform to dominant models of WP, and can be pushed towards 'fair access' models and arguably deficit approaches. Activity generally takes the form of the 'tried and tested' mainstays of WP outreach – mentoring, summer schools, university visits and tutoring – but TSOs also have scope and incentive to innovate, operating as small and responsive organisations in a competitive marketplace. As effectively 'enactors' of WP policy, how TSOs design, deliver and evaluate activities could play a role in whether the Office for Students meets its 'ambitious' access and participation targets.

AS INFLUENCERS

TSOs tend to enjoy a positive public image, at least in comparison with universities. Their WP work is praised by politicians and civil servants as good practice (for example, Milburn, 2012) and their research is held in high regard in political circles for its accessibility and clarity of message (for example, HL Deb, 2010). Although few have the political clout of university mission groups or vice-chancellors, their opinions on WP are actively sought (Millward, 2018) and several have played active roles in public consultations. However, relatively little is known about their positions on WP and what informs these – are they acting as advocates, expert-practitioners or simply interested parties?

AS EVALUATORS

Evaluation practices in WP-focussed TSOs appear more developed than in universities (Harrison et al., 2018), not least because they are accustomed to demonstrating impact to funders. Their evaluation work has gained credibility quickly in government circles, fitting with a 'what works' approach and making use of their expertise in dissemination and promotion. In some cases they are the lead evaluator for partnership activity with universities. Some are able to share their work and experience but, for many, there are resource restrictions due to the nature of their funding and, as with universities, incentives to share evidence could be limited by competition and fear of critical scrutiny.

WHERE NOW?

It is not uncommon for perspectives on WP to focus mostly on HEIs (the work of further education colleges and employers is similarly often absent) but, given the potential influence of TSOs, their inclusion in academic perspectives of WP seems timely. Thus far, their work has not been subject to the same academic scrutiny as that of universities, meaning that we know relatively little about what shapes it or how interpretations of their missions interact with the expectations of funders, partners or beneficiaries. They face many of the same challenges as HEIs but also those of the charity sector, including funding constraints, governance and accountability. Viewing these organisations as integral to how WP is enacted in England could open them up to inclusion in broader conversations about what we want WP policy and practice to look like and how this might be navigated in different contexts. For TSOs, it could create the potential to ask holistic questions that funders are not always inclined to resource. For all parties, shared knowledge may also create valuable opportunities to do (and think) things differently.

I suggest it is also time for us to look more closely at the current landscape of large, politically active and well-networked organisations playing a part in widening participation.

ENDNOTE

1. My research focusses specifically on registered charities in England with a core aim around access to and success beyond HE for 'underrepresented' or 'disadvantaged' groups. However, there are many for-profit and semi-independent organisations working in this space to whom some of these comments will also apply.

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THE VIEW FROM MALTA

Social and emotional education in Malta

An education that matters

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Children and young people are facing unprecedented challenges and stresses as a result of the rapid and continuous global, social, economic and technological changes taking place. Such challenges require more than just cognitive and academic competences. Both cognitive and social and emotional competences and resources are necessary to navigate the uncertain but fast-moving challenges on the path towards autonomous, active and healthy citizenship. An instrumentalist, narrow approach to education, focussed on preparing young adults for the market economy, is clearly out of place within the social realities of the 21st century. Our task as educators in preparing young people to be 21st-century citizens is to provide a balanced, relevant and meaningful education which integrates both cognitive and social and emotional education.

The Maltese National Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012) promotes a broad, holistic vision of education, with learners supported to become autonomous, self-regulating and self-determining individuals. It underlines the need to address both the cognitive and affective dimensions of education and the importance of developing children's wellbeing as part of the mainstream educational process from the early years onwards. Health and physical education, the content area most focussed on students' social and emotional education, includes personal, social and careers development as a curricular subject. It aims to equip learners with 'the necessary knowledge, competencies, skill, attitudes, and values which they need to maintain, promote and enhance physical, emotional, psychological and social wellbeing throughout their school life and as lifelong learners' (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012, p. 35). Other recent interventions, particularly in the early years, are the use of 'circle time' to promote young children's social and emotional competence in a caring and nurturing environment (Cefai, Ferrario, Cavioni, Carter & Grech, 2014), and resilience education in which children learn such competences as relationship building, self-determination, problem solving and turning challenges into opportunities through a universal curriculum (Cefai et al., 2018).

While social and emotional education (SEE) is becoming increasingly recognised as an integral part of education in Malta, more needs to be done to ensure that students are provided with balanced, quality learning that integrates academic and social and emotional education. There is a need for an integrated, systemic, whole school approach to SEE, with all teachers and school staff, in collaboration with parents and the community, sharing responsibility. This entails direct instruction in SEE at all school levels, embedding SEE in the other areas of the curriculum, creating enabling classroom and whole school climates which facilitate SEE, working collaboratively with parents and the local community, and providing adequate teacher education in SEE during initial education and continuing professional development.

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The multicultural school in Malta

A leadership challenge

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We are living in an uncertain, turbulent world in which issues of corruption, injustice, migration, poverty and acts of terrorism affect many countries. As we witness such events they may make us feel helpless and vulnerable, or we may remain detached, oblivious to the realities that surround us. In a small country like Malta we are also feeling the pressure of such events. In fact, we are witnessing rapid changes to the social fabric of our country. We live in societies that are becoming more diverse, complex and unfamiliar. The tapestry that is being woven around us is quite different from the ones in which we grew up. Old and current ways of thinking and doing will not help us address such issues.

While official policy documents speak of the need to move away from a top-down hierarchical structure of decision-making to more decentralised forms of governance, the reality shows otherwise. Data from a series of studies involving school leaders show that they still feel a top-down approach is being adopted, leaving limited space for distributed forms of governance (Bezzina & Cutajar, 2012).

> **We are witnessing rapid changes to the social fabric of our country.**

Within this context the area of multiculturalism stands out. The influx of migrants into the Maltese population has brought both unprecedented challenges and opportunities. The challenges have stretched the resources of our country – a country that has attempted, and is still working on, numerous initiatives to help integrate migrant students into the education system. As witnessed through various studies, this is by no means an easy endeavour. Many school leaders, together with their teaching staff, have voiced apprehensions about how to adapt to these unexpected changes (Vassallo, 2016a).

Local studies have described the attempts being undertaken to implement strategies and practices that are guided and enabled by particular values – namely those of care, trust, respect and sacrifice – and leadership that is invitational in nature, and whereby leaders serve as role models as they nurture a culture of empowerment (Bezzina, 2018).

At the same time, studies have also highlighted the concern that headteachers feel about the way reforms are being introduced and implemented: there are constant references to work overload and stress, to the need for greater support at a personal and collective level, and the need to start letting go so that schools can take the initiative (Bezzina & Vassallo, 2019; Vassallo, 2016a, 2016b).

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BERA SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP
CREATIVITIES IN EDUCATION

Creativity in 21st Century Education

Where, how and what next?

JO TROWSDALE
CONVENOR, CREATIVITIES IN EDUCATION SIG

In recent years there have been positive signs of a revival of policy interest in creativity in education in England. While other UK nations have maintained and even developed a narrative since 2010, and global interest has grown, England had been retreating. However, the prospect of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) testing in 2021 appears to have influenced the funding in England of the Durham Commission on Creativity and Education, which published its final report in 2019. In a recent BERA Blog article, Kerry Chappell (2020) noted the report's valuable recommendations:

> **'creativity to be taught in every school in all subjects and beyond; a growing network of accredited collaborating schools; Ofsted recognition of creativity; higher education (HE) involvement in researching creativity; and recognition of creativity within digital and the arts.'**

Advocates for England's involvement in the PISA 2021 creativity test have not, however, been heeded by the government, which elected to opt out (Civinini, 2019).

The event held in June 2019 by BERA's Creativities in Education special interest group (SIG) – Disentangling and debating creativity in education: Methodologies for research and assessment – preceded that decision by the Department for Education. It sought to 'bring together national and international experts to provoke debate and thought into how we might better research, evaluate and perhaps assess creativity in education: its character, development, value and impact'. Professors Pat Thomson (University of Nottingham), Todd Lubart (University of Descartes, Paris) and Joanna Haynes (University of Plymouth) offered insights from their experience in qualitative, quantitative and post-qualitative methodologies and provoked discussion into issues such as fitness for purpose and the relationship of design to current policy and practice discourses.

All presentations can be found on the BERA website (bera.ac.uk/CiE-Jun2019).

Our next SIG event will be Creativity in 21st century education: Where, how and what next?, in which we will pick up the baton from the Durham review to look back across early 21st-century practice and research as well as forward. We will invite participants to share insights and together develop perspectives on how creativity has manifested and been researched in 21st century education.

Our contributors are all keen to be part of the postponed event once we are able to hold it. Headteacher Sarah Bracken (Finham Primary, Coventry) will, with Professor Teresa Cremin (Open University), discuss how creativity has developed and shaped her school's values and practices over the last two decades. Bill Lucas (University of Winchester) will offer a perspective on the international situation. The event will conclude by imagining how creativity in education might be valuably manifested and researched. It will culminate with the annual Anna Craft Memorial Lecture, delivered as a recording by Professor Howard Gardner (Harvard University).

We will be in contact in due course with some pre-event prompts and a new date.

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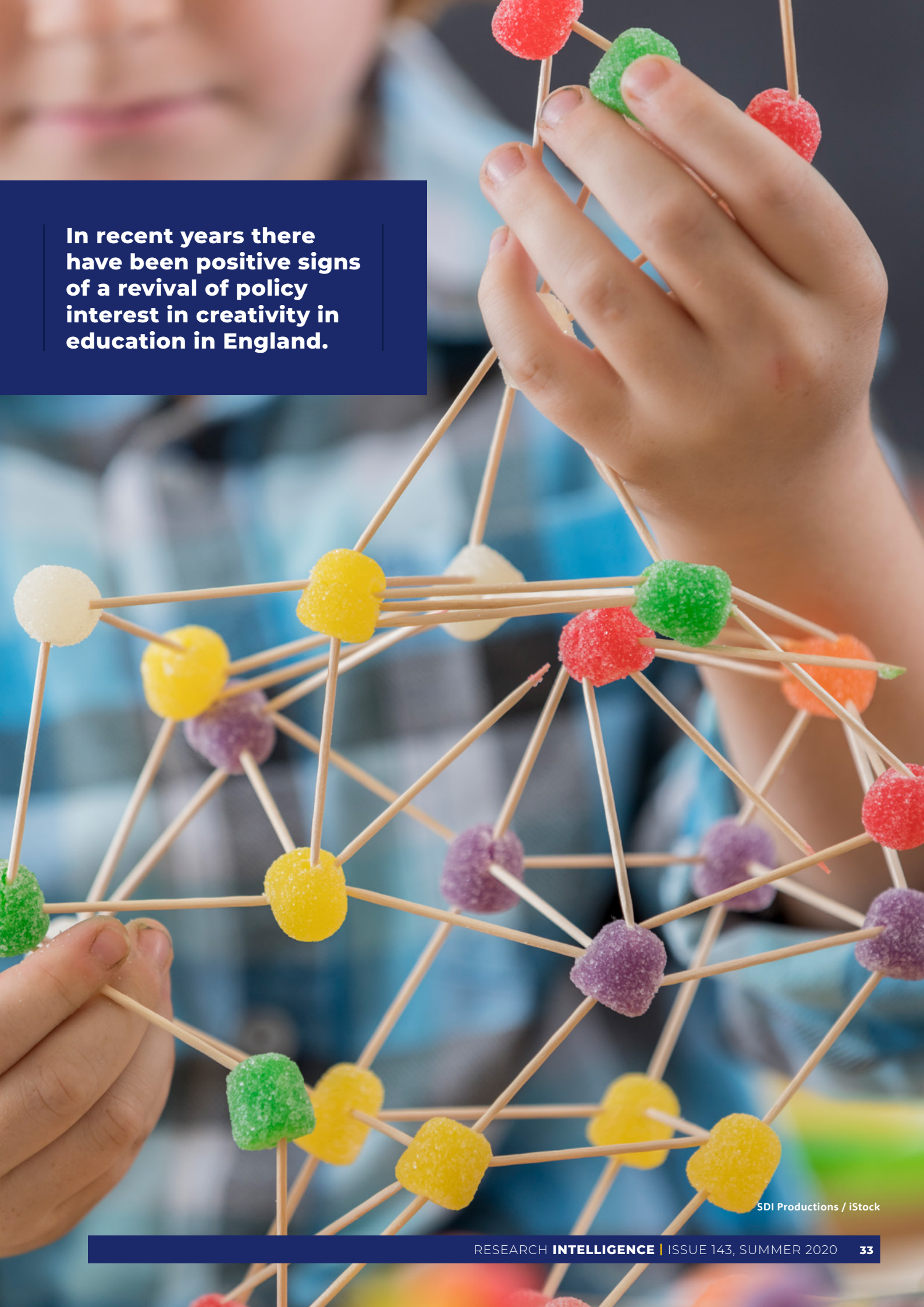

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BERA EARLY CAREER RESEARCHER NETWORK

The coronavirus crisis

What support for early career researchers?

Scott Trento / Unsplash


SANJA DJERASIMOVIC & OLIVER HOOPER
UNIVERSITY OF EXETER &
LOUGHBOROUGH UNIVERSITY

At the time of writing, the future of the higher education (HE) sector in the UK – and across the globe – is one of great uncertainty. The shift of much of UK universities' activity to various online fora on account of the coronavirus crisis has required much effort, dedication and creativity from academic and professional staff alike. It is noteworthy that this follows the latest wave of what was proving to be the most significant industrial action in the history of the UK's HE sector, demonstrating staff's commitment to supporting students by bringing the academic year to some sort of a conclusion, albeit one somewhat different to what they might have been expecting.

However, as the sector prepares for the exam season it is having to wrestle with considerable uncertainty about the near-future status of its core operations and those performing them, stemming from the financial implications of the coronavirus crisis and the lack of clarity around how these might be mitigated. For the moment, it is highly likely that student intake in the 2020/21 academic year will be lower than anticipated, particularly with respect to the international student cohort. Furthermore, at the time of writing, no clear guidance has yet been issued by the UK government concerning, for example, future research grant releases – although UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) insists that ongoing calls remain active, with extended deadlines – or the issuing of the next round of quality-related research funding now that Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021 has been postponed indefinitely. The cloud over universities' financial futures has provoked a mixture of responses from the sector. All institutions are engaging in some form of financial reorganisation, while perhaps also counting on a likely – though probably not universal – government 'bailout' (McVitty, 2020). However, it has been reported that some institutions are already resorting to redundancy strategies, starting with casualised staff (Batty, 2020).

Early career researchers (ECRs), particularly postdocs, are not unaccustomed to living with uncertainty (Djerasimovic & Villani, 2019), but the current crisis exacerbates the precariousness of their already destabilised professional lives and identities. A high portion of universities' casualised and fixed-term contract workforce – more than a third of the entire academic workforce in 2018/19, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency – is made up of ECRs. At the moment, many of these ECRs are engaging in a #coronacontract campaign demanding some level of employment contract security for precarious teaching and research staff. Simultaneously, the University and College Union (UCU) has addressed the issue in a letter to UKRI, asking for protection measures for such staff. Guaranteeing secure contracts, particularly for those whose work is tied into a research project grant, is an important first step in responding to the crisis in the short term and ensuring basic levels of existential security. Similarly, the provision of extensions to doctorates, especially where externally funded, and widened access to hardship funds for doctoral students, will assist those whose capacity to progress their doctoral research will have understandably been impacted by the crisis. In early April, UKRI announced six-month funded extensions for doctoral students due to complete their studies by the end of March 2021. While this is a positive step, it arguably does not go far enough to safeguard the interests of those in the earlier stages of doctoral study, who have been equally affected by the crisis.

It must be recognised that, at this time, ECRs are facing increased pressures not only within their professional lives but also in their personal ones. For many, the crisis has brought with it the need to care for children and families, along with supporting neighbours and communities. Measures need to be put in place to alleviate the burden for individuals with caring responsibilities, and it is heartening to see that many institutions are taking steps to assess the needs of their ECR cohorts and provide adequate support in this regard. However, it is important that these measures are successfully combined with resources that can help ECRs cope with the emotional and psychological effects of their changed (working) lives. ECRs need to be provided with enabling spaces of communication along with peer and supervisory support and exchange – the kind of support that has consistently been demonstrated to counter mental health risks and improve the doctoral experience (McAlpine, Skakni & Pyhältö, 2020; Mackie & Bates, 2019; Metcalfe, Wilson & Levecque, 2018). Such resources can include, for example, reading and writing groups, peer discussion fora and training sessions focussing on working strategies, as well as more general mental health and wellbeing support (see for example Lawrence, 2020; Longstaff, 2020). Importantly, support can be demonstrated simply by challenging the notion that we need to be productive during this time, which can itself make ECRs feel under a great deal of (unnecessary) pressure.

Early career researchers, particularly postdocs, are not unaccustomed to living with uncertainty, but the current crisis exacerbates the precariousness of their already destabilised professional lives and identities.

As well as focussing on the immediate consequences of the coronavirus crisis, it is perhaps worth considering the long-lasting impacts it may have on the HE sector. It is highly likely that its negative implications will disproportionately affect ECRs, with reduced availability of doctoral studentships, a constricted job market and perhaps fewer grant application opportunities. Therefore, it is important to ensure that ECRs' voices are appropriately recognised and given due consideration in measures to mitigate the effects of the crisis and promote the sector's recovery. There has been a notable lack of representation thus far, and this will only serve to further disempower those disproportionally affected by the crisis – namely ECRs.

While the extent and duration of the crisis and the possible mitigation measures remain a matter of speculation, perhaps we should try to ensure that its resolution does not simply return us to 'business as usual'. Instead, consideration might be given to what the sector could become. We – individual academics, our institutions, and the societies representing and developing our profession – must work to explore the benefits of a 'decelerated' academy, the opportunities it presents for a healthier and more meaningful approach to research and teaching, and how we might better support current and future generations of ECRs in order to build a sector that is not only sustainable but fair and just.

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BRITISH EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

BCF CURRICULUM INVESTIGATION GRANT 2020/2021

The BCF Curriculum Investigation Grant is intended to support research led by schools and colleges with a focus on curriculum inquiry and investigation. The grant is worth up to **£5,000** for the winner, with **£3,500** for two other grants, for a total of **£12,000**. We would expect the grant work to be carried out in the 2020/21 academic year with the final report being submitted by September 2021.

£5,000 FOR THE WINNER AND £3,500 FOR TWO RUNNERS-UP

The BCF Curriculum Investigation Grant is for applicants who are based within schools and colleges. Applications must make clear how the grant will enable applicants to do the following:

- Identify an issue impacting on the development of an aspect of the curriculum in their school/college;
- Design, implement and evaluate a response to the issue identified;
- Disseminate the processes and outcomes of the inquiry/investigation within the school/college;
- Develop a strategy to sustain curriculum investigation/inquiry within the school/college;
- Contribute to research and scholarship in the study of the curriculum;

Applications will be scored out of 5 in each category and weighed against:

- Potential for impact on school/college curriculum
- Applicability of research to others in similar educational setting/sector
- Research quality, including rigour, transparency and validity, and conforms with BERA ethical guidelines
- (Potential) impact for policy-makers, practitioners and other research users

DEADLINE FOR APPLICATIONS: FRIDAY 19TH JUNE 2020